

## Life-long learning and private English Circles in Japan

Melissa SENG

While many countries are having to come to terms with a greying population, Japan is seen by many as a test case as to how to deal with this 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon.

While the number of young wage earners decreases and the number of people over 65 continues to climb, with the majority of these people staying healthy and active until their 70s or later, both the government and market place is being forced to continually reassess how to keep this growing demographic productive and engaged.

In 2010, the number of people under 15 in Japan was almost half that in the over 65 group (Japan Statistics Bureau, 2011) and in 2014 the over 65 demographic will already make up nearly 25% of the entire population (Ministry Of Internal Affairs and Communication, 2013). This is a continuing trend and has forced all areas of society to evaluate how best to cope with this phenomenon.

One area that is becoming particularly concerned with this greying population is education. Education in Japan is big business. Private schools, universities, cram schools and other educational and cultural facilities have

traditionally relied on the youth market. Over 80% of undergraduate students are enrolled in private institutions. (Newby et al., 2009, p.15). The other area of education that is unique to Japan is the low number of mature age students attending university (Mext 2009).

Looking at the ratio of students aged 25 or over, the ratio in Japan is only 1.8%, compared to the average ratio of 21.3% among OECD countries. Similarly, 80% of freshmen at universities and colleges in Japan are below 19 years of age. This is the lowest among OECD member countries, indicating that the vast majority of freshmen enrolling at institutions of higher education are from the 18-year-old population.

This creates problems for the educational institutions, the large number of people relying on the education industry for their income, and the government, as it needs to provide opportunities for the ever-growing number of “seniors” to maintain their mental and physical health.

### **Life-long Learning in Japan**

While “life-long learning” has been a catch cry in Japan since the 1940s and in 2006 MEXT said that 10 million people were currently enrolled in 230,000 life long learning classes, this lifelong learning has been seen as fulfilling social aims, not the acquisition of skills (Okumoto, 2003). Lifelong learning in Japan “aspires to the integration of the individual’s experiences through thinking, feeling, and action. A piecemeal approach to learning, which tends to separate thinking, feeling, and action, may not effectively contribute to the human resource development task of the individual...lifelong learning aims to achieve a matured citizen” (Ohsako, 2002, p.199). Yamamoto, Fujitsuka and Honda-Okistu characterize lifelong

learning in Japan “as a means for achieving a richness of spirit and a sense of purpose in life...learning for pleasure is one of the rationales for lifelong learning in Japan” (Schütze & Slowey, 2000, p.12).

Community centers in Japan were established during the American occupation after WWII, and range from small, unmanned buildings in neighborhoods to large staffed downtown centers. Learning circles, as part of a myriad of services, offer citizens an opportunity to participate in educational programs for a small basic room rental fee (Clause 2010).

It is these “learning circles”, which can be established by a community center or less formally by the students themselves and take place in either a community center, a coffee shop or a student’s or teacher’s home that are of interest here.

Private classes of adult students have long been a source of income to the foreign community in Japan. Teachers range from highly qualified to totally unqualified, with everything in between. What is common however, is that demand for these classes is increasing and they are becoming a more and more important source of income to professional teachers who are finding it increasingly difficult to find employment in schools and university as the student population decreases.

It is therefore important to look at the trends in lifelong learning in Japan and unofficial learning circles, in particular.

In a 2008 seminar on aging in Japan it was noted that the way the elderly people spend their free time is changing. While over 27% of those aged 65 to 69 and 17.5% of those aged 70 and over are involved in studying

and researching, the amount of time spent in leisure activities (e.g. karaoke and gate ball) has been decreasing. Participation in voluntary activities has only shown a slight increase (Japan Ageing Resource Center 2008).

While difficult to prove from the available data, it would seem that a lot of this studying involves learning English.

Those turning 65 were born into post-war Japan and the American occupation. By 1960 still less than 60% of students were continuing on to senior high school (UNESCO 2000).

By 1956 English was adopted as a subject for the entrance examinations to all high schools in Japan. Although English was not a required subject by law, it became a *de facto* requirement for students in order to enter high schools. As there was competition to enter prestigious schools, the motivation of the learners again centered on the acquisition of Juken Eigo (Iino, n.d).

So the majority of those under 70 years of age in Japan probably studied English to some extent at school, although until very recently English language education in public schools has been especially and constantly criticized for its failure in communicative language acquisition. Some point out that Japanese high school graduates cannot even carry on a simple daily conversation in English after six years of learning English in school (Hosoki 2010).

These findings are backed up in the Japanese General Social Surveys (JGSS 2012). In 2003, the most recent survey to ask about English ability, 57% of respondents, when asked about their English ability, checked the box

that said “I can hardly speak English”.

So where does this leave current Japanese adults who wish to improve their English? For those who require English skills for the workplace, most companies provide classes. For larger companies, especially manufacturing companies these are often in-company programs. Smaller companies tend to use out-of-company programs but all are usually contracted through private providers who either sub-contract teachers or use their in-house staff. Companies either pay for the classes or subsidize them heavily but expect workers to attend out of working hours and achieve improved scores on standard tests, such as TOEIC, that are used in Japan to judge English proficiency (Kitao et al. 1995).

However only 16% of respondents to the 2003 Japanese General Social Survey said that “Work” was a reason to learn English. This low level of studying English for work is especially true for women and when broken into gender the two answers to the question about reasons for studying English; “Because it is useful for my job” and “Because it is useful for finding or changing a job”, 34.5% of male respondents answered positively compared to 15.9% of females (JGSS 2012).

In 2007 Kobayashi, did a study of non-elite working women who were studying English in Canada. He found that the beneficial effects of English proficiency are limited in Japan to those men and very few women who are likely to succeed anyway. “it is mostly the male elite business and engineering employees working for well established companies who can advance their expected career mobility further with additional skills such as English.” (Kobayashi, 2007).

However according to 2011 Official Statistics of Japan there were nearly 4 million Japanese over the age of 40 who said they were involved in studying English (Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities 2011). The largest reason for doing this was for “Self Improvement”. However the percentage doing this through work, government sponsored classes, private institutions or radio or TV was very small. The largest percentage of respondents said they were studying through “Other” means. The “Other” category increased even more when looked at as a percentage of people who listed their main work as housework. Although not specifically stated one can take this to mean mainly female respondents, in Japan’s still mostly traditionally gender role segregated society.

While it is impossible to definitively say how the relatively large group of people in the “Other” category are learning English, I believe it is through the abundant private classes that are held every day in every city, town and neighborhood in Japan. To find out more about these classes that are relatively unrecognized by the government but obviously fulfilling a need I distributed a questionnaire to people teaching private classes to adults. As a teacher of some of these classes myself, I did not find the results particularly surprising but was interested to see that the findings were very much in line with my own experience.

I will look at the results of the survey and then correlate and expand the findings from my own experience.

## **The Survey**

The survey consisted of 9 multiple choice questions which were aimed at finding out about the students, the class and their motivation for being there.

I distributed the survey mainly through social media (Facebook and yahoo groups). I received 83 replies from people who said they taught private classes, as opposed to classes organized through a language school, city or government facility or company. All the respondents were native English speakers of non-Japanese nationality.

81.9% of respondents taught groups with an average age of over 40 years. Of these, 36% said that the average class age was between 40 and 50, 25% put the average class age at between 50 and 60 and 39% said the majority of their students were between 60 and 70 years old. It was especially interesting to see the large number of students who were over 60 years old. Several respondents commented that they also had class members who were over 70 but this was not enough to change the average class age.

The second question asked about the number of students in a class. 31% had 2 or 3 students per class, 32% said there were 4 or 5, 19% had between 6 and 7 while the remainder had 8 or more. This shows that in these private classes the most usual class size is between 2 and 5 students.

In the next group of questions I was interested in looking at the student/student and student/ teacher relationship. I asked how many years had the class been together and for how many years the teacher had been teaching the class. In regards to how long the class had been together it seems that most of these classes, once formed, like to stay together and if possible keep the same teacher. 35% of classes had been together for between 2 and 5 years, 21% for 6 to 9 years and an impressive 33% for over 10 years.

The number of years the teacher had been with the class also showed an attachment to the students. Native speaking English teachers in Japan can

generally be split into two groups; those who come for a year or so to have the Japanese “experience” and leave, and those who arrive and stay for many years. Although the question of years the teacher had been in Japan was not specifically asked it seems from the answers that people who teach these private classes were in the latter group. 46% said that they had been teaching the group for between 2 and 5 years, 18% for between 6 and 9 years and 15% for more than 10 years.

So it can be seen that while some teachers and classes stay together for many years, it is also quite common that the class stays together even when the teacher changes. This is probably due to the fact that when asked who formed the class 47% of survey respondents said that the students had originally formed the class. 10% answered that the city or community center had started the class, 32% that the current teacher had formed the class through advertising and word of mouth and 10% that a previous teacher had formed the class. There were also several comments that while the original class had been started by the city or a language school, when this finished and the students wished to continue studying they made their own arrangements with the teacher to continue in a private capacity. This backs up the observation made by Clause (2010) when she made her study of learning circles in Japan.

Once a program is initially started and the participant roster filled, the members of the group are completely responsible for maintaining membership, determining activities, and establishing classroom practices. Although the learning paradigm and student-centered classroom has been recently reintroduced as a revolutionary concept in the college classroom (Barr & Tagg, 1995), learning circles from their inception in the 1950s have been



driven by the efforts of the group, as members act as stewards of their programs (Clause 2010).

Answers to the question about where the group meets also followed previous observations about learning circles. 40% said that they meet at a community center or public room. 19% met in the teacher’s home, 11% in a student’s home and 30% said in another space. When asked to clarify this other space the majority said it was a private classroom with the remainder being in a coffee shop or restaurant.

The next group of questions on the survey asked about the structure of the class. This included the number of times a month the class met as well as what the focus of the class was. The majority of classes met once a week (55%) with twice a month being the next (29%) and three times a month having 13%.

When asked what the focus of the class was, and being able to choose more than one answer the overwhelming answer was for conversation (91%), followed by listening (30%) and grammar (25%).

Q.8. What does the class mainly consist of? (Please choose as many as necessary).

Conversation	91.4%
Listening	31.4%
Grammar	24.2%
Intensive reading (vocabulary study and comprehension questions)	17.1%
4 skills fairly evenly divided	17.1%
Extensive reading (novels /short stories/ longer articles)	7.1%
Test Preparation	0%

The final question asked about the motivation of the students to attend the class. Once again the results were in line with my personal experience and also that of the Japan General Survey.

**Q.9. Why do most students attend your class?**

As a hobby	43.9%
To improve their English to travel	2%
For their work	6%
To be with friends	6%
A bit of all of the above	42.1%

The comments on this question were useful in clarifying these answers. Several people said that they had many English teachers in their class who wanted to improve/ maintain their English. Others variously wrote that their students said they wanted to “keep their brain young” and to know more about current/ world affairs.

From the results of this survey it would seem that the two private classes I teach myself are very typical of these kinds of classes in Japan. To expand and put a more personal view on the statistics I will take a closer look at these classes.

**A closer look at two classes**

Currently I have 2 classes that meet twice a month. Over the 14 years I have been teaching them both the composition and the timing of the classes have changed slightly with one class merging with another, some members leaving and others joining. The core members of the classes however have remained the same. The classes originally met three times a month but due to both student and teacher needs this changed to twice

a month 5 years ago. All members are, and always have been, female and married with children.

Class A has five students with ages ranging from mid 50s to mid 60s. Their English level ranges from intermediate to advanced with three of the five having passed Eiken level 1 when they were in their 20s. Four of them are English teachers, two part-time at high school and two have their own cram schools. One of the cram school teachers also teaches TOEIC Test preparation classes at several manufacturing companies, through a sub-contractor. The student with the lowest level of English is also the only one who doesn't use English for work but originally started as a friend of one of the other students. She enjoys the class as a hobby, "approved" time off from her work in the family business, and uses her English for the occasional overseas holiday.

Both high school English teachers are due to retire in the next year or so. When questioned on whether they would be continuing with the class both said they would, as not only do they enjoy the mental stimulation but it also provides them with a legitimate excuse to take time off from caring for aging parents who live with them.

The class meets for two hours per lesson in a community center. Students provide snacks and drinks, which add to an informal and "chatty" atmosphere. Generally the first hour is taken up with conversation. Students update the class on what is happening with their families, any trips they have taken and current affairs that they have found interesting.

The second hour is centered around textbooks which are chosen with input from the students. Although the materials the class wishes to study has

evolved over the years, all members are satisfied with the current format of an intensive reading text with comprehension and vocabulary questions, and a novel, usually fiction, for extensive reading. At the students' request we also have a regular vocabulary quiz. They have stated that they don't want to spend class time doing listening practice as they feel that our conversation time provides enough "in-class" listening and they also all enjoy watching movies in English so feel they can do this out of class time. As four out of five are English teachers there are rarely any grammar questions. When there are, it tends to be due to grammatical structures which are acceptable, especially in dialogue/ conversation, for native speakers, but don't always follow the grammatical rules. Usually the students enjoy discussing these problems amongst themselves and only ask me, as the native speaker teacher, for clarification, other examples or for exceptions. The only other area the students struggle with is colloquial, regional or slang expressions.

Class B has 3 students, all female, with ages from 58 to 72. Their English level is approximately pre-intermediate. None have ever done any English tests or use their English outside the classroom except for overseas holidays, which they take about once every two years. All see the class as a mixture of a hobby, a socially and family approved break from caring for aging relatives, and "keeping their brain active". Two of the three also do other "life-long learning" classes such as hula dancing, computer studies and flower arranging.

Like Class A, this class meets for two hours twice a month with snacks and drinks provided by the students. It usually meets in the home of one of the students, and on the rare occasions she is unable to attend, in a nearby

coffee shop. The structure of the class follows that of Class A with the first hour being general conversation and the second hour textbook based.

This class prefers a 4 skills textbook which is usually chosen by the teacher, with class approval. They feel that learning specific grammar points helps to improve their English and they need a listening component which is short and structured. The main difficulty with this class is finding a textbook at their level but with topics which are suitable for their age group. Most textbooks at this level are aimed at young adults and have topics such as pop music, looking for a job and boy/girlfriends. The other criteria that needs to be taken into account is the size of the print, as many in this age group struggle with pages comprised of a large amount of small print. Hopefully publishers will become aware of this increasing demographic and produce books of more suitable topics and layout.

## **Conclusion**

As the population of Japan continues to age, it is becoming increasingly important that the mental and physical well-being of this greying population is maintained. While the government acknowledges the need for life-long learning it is obvious that there is a lack in the area of government funded and organized classes. Private English circles have an important part to play in the Japanese wish to expand their learning opportunities, whether it's to maintain or improve language or have a chance at a hobby that gives people, especially women, a socially and culturally approved chance to get out of the house and their often overwhelming responsibilities there. Although not widely discussed or acknowledged the make-up of these classes allows people to socialize with others they would not normally meet in their daily lives and the act of using English allows them to broach topics

that would very often be taboo to discuss in Japanese, such as unhappiness and problems they see in the society and their family.

Apart from a few classes in big cities, most government sponsored English circles meet for only a few weeks at a time, with no curriculum or English level grouping of students. These classes are often large and contain students from beginners who want a few English phrases for travelling to advanced level students who wish to discuss convoluted grammar points. While private English circles fulfill an important role, access for many people to these classes is often limited due to financial constraints and by the closed nature of established classes. It is time the Japanese government acknowledged and acted on the need for a more structured and academic life-long learning program and ensured access for all who desire to increase their knowledge, at any level and purpose.

## Appendix

Q 1. What is the average age of students in your classes?

Under 40	16.8%
40 – 50	30.1%
50 – 60	20.4%
60 – 70	32.5%
Over 70	0%

Q 2. What is the average number of students in your classes?

2 – 3	31.3%
4 – 5	32.4%
6 – 7	19.3%
Over 8	17%

Q3. Approximately how many years has the class been together?

Less than 2 years	11%
2 – 5 years	35.1%
6 – 9 years	20.8%
More than 10 years	33.1%

Q4. How many years have you been teaching the class?

Less than 2 years	20.1%
2 – 5 years	46.4%
6 – 9 years	18.3%
More than 10 years	15.2%

Q5. Who formed the class?

The students	47.4%
I did (current teacher)	32.1%
A previous teacher	10.2%
The city/community center	10.3%

Q6. Where does the class meet?

My (teacher's) home	19%
A student's home	10.8%
A community center	40.2%
Other	30%

Please specify “other” – a private classroom (43.3%), a coffee shop or restaurant (35.6%), an apartment complex meeting room (12%), a dance studio (9.1%).

Q7. How often does the class meet?

Once a week	55%
Three times a month	11.9%
Twice a month	29%
Once a month	3.1%
Every day	1%

Q8. What does the class mainly consist of? (Choose all that apply)

Conversation	91.4%
Extensive reading	7.1%
Intensive reading	17.4%
Listening	31.4%
Test preparation	0%
Grammar	24.2%
4 skills	17.1%

Q9. Why do most students attend the class?

As a hobby	43.9%
For traveling	2%
For work	6%
To be with friends	6%
A bit of all of the above	42.1%

Comments: “All but one are English teachers themselves. They say they come to continue improving and to hone their skills”

“For friendship and cognitive training”

“To keep brain young”

“To keep up with and discuss current events”

“Social life”



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